

# The first-person plural in Hanif Kureishi's essays

Gunning, Dave

DOI:

[10.1177/0021989414554631](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989414554631)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Gunning, D 2015, 'The first-person plural in Hanif Kureishi's essays', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 133-149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989414554631>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

## **Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is the author's accepted version of an article which is published in: The Journal of Commonwealth Literature: Gunning D. The first-person plural in Hanif Kureishi's essays. The Journal of Commonwealth Literature. 2015;50(2):133-149. doi:10.1177/0021989414554631

Eligibility for repository checked January 2015

## **General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

## **Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## The first-person plural in Hanif Kureishi's essays

In 2011, Faber and Faber published Hanif Kureishi's *Collected Essays*, a substantial work containing thirty pieces written over nearly three decades. Critics regularly point to Kureishi's wide output in this genre as another string to his impressive bow, complementing his diverse achievements in short fiction and the novel, as well in writing for film and theatre. But this acknowledgement rarely flowers into a full engagement with the essays, which are frequently read only for the insights they might grant into his work in other genres. Even when critics do explicitly look to the essays, the treatment tends to be brief: in Bradley Buchanan's otherwise insightful reading of Kureishi's writing, for example, they get only three paragraphs of mostly descriptive attention towards the end of his book (2007: 144–6). Ruvani Ranasinha only engages with Kureishi's most famous essay — 1986's 'The Rainbow Sign' — but she does make some interesting observations about his engagement with the form, noting that the essay is 'explicit', a writing strategy 'that contrasts with his more customary refusal to be situated in one position' (2002: 5). This observation allows Ranasinha to move on to exploring the 'refusal to commit' in the majority of Kureishi's works, his 'validation of uncertainty, resistance to totalising narratives and concern with the relativity of perception' (2002: 5).<sup>1</sup> There seems to be value, however, in instead staying squarely with the essays for once and exploring their particular aesthetic and political sensibilities. The literary essay is a key site for the consolidation of authorial personae and in paying attention to the ideological drives that are embedded within Kureishi's particular grammars when using the form, the reader gains useful insights into the way he locates himself within his social and political, as much as literary, moment. The explicitness that Ranasinha notes in 'The Rainbow Sign' is frequently to be found in Kureishi's essays, sometimes in opposition to his avowed beliefs about the essay form,

though it is worth beginning by examining some of the diverse registers he uses to characterise the form and its potential. His views on the potential of the essay frequently echo major commentators on the form; and do not seem to include the quality of directness that Ranasinha correctly observes.

Kureishi presents his essays as a crucial aspect of what makes him a writer. This is an element of his central belief that writing is a vocation and that a writer is not just someone able to make their living by putting pen to paper, but also takes on a deeper intellectual and cultural role — in one of the essays in the collection, he describes being able to call oneself a writer ‘both consolidating and liberating, like a Cartesian statement of existence’ (2011: 137).<sup>2</sup> The *Collected Essays* contains an introduction which ends with Kureishi making a number of interesting observations on the nature of the essay. Such a move is actually unusual for him: although he comments regularly throughout the collection on the nature of the literary and what it can do, his vision of literature tends to be primarily animated by the idea of imagination (as opposed to craft, for example) and this usually entails that when he evokes ‘literature’ it is the novel he has in mind. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, his contemplation of the essay form proceeds from a consideration of how the form differs from his ideal sense of what the novel can achieve:

If a novel is concerned with numerous voices, and wants to keep them in play until the dispute is done, an essay is a monologue, a form of direct speech, and a whisper at that. The essay is as flexible a form as a story or a novel; it is amenable to most forms of content. It can be as intellectual as Roland Barthes, Adam Phillips or Susan Sontag, as informal and casual as Max Beerbohm, or as cool and minimalist as Joan Didion. Unlike academic writing, the essay is usually written for the general or ‘common’ reader

rather than for experts or students; for someone in a deck chair rather than at a desk. There should be neither footnotes nor much information in an essay; as a form, it is a meditation rather than an act of persuasion. (xv)

This is both an apology for, and an idealisation of, the essay: he offers a model of what the essay could be, but fails to admit any sense of how actual attempts at the form might fall short of this epitome. While it is no doubt useful in understanding how he imagines his essays to work, or might like them to work, the focus here on meditation above persuasion may provide a poor characterisation of the form some of Kureishi's essays take. It is important not only to examine the content of his essays, but also to interrogate their style, in order to analyse their function. What Kureishi writes sometimes is contradicted by the way he writes it.

In 'Something Given: Reflections on Writing',<sup>3</sup> Kureishi looks to distinguish literature from journalism, arguing that they are fundamentally different in terms of intention (which he sees as more important than any stylistic opposition): 'Most journalism is about erasing personality in favour of the facts, or the "story". The personality of the journalist is unimportant. In literature personality is all' (280). A clear distinction is set up between the two modes of writing, with one looking to describe the world as it is, and the other perhaps more in tune with the aim of illuminating the personality that is doing the describing, or capturing the texture, rather just the nature, of the world. The characterisation of the essay form that Kureishi offers in his introduction to the collection would seem then to place it far more within his concept of the literary than the journalistic sphere, but this distinction seems quickly to flounder when the reader turns to the essays themselves. Many of his essays are undoubtedly intended to capture some of the 'multifariousness and complication of existence' (280), but they nonetheless

frequently remain essays at persuasion, and rely heavily on a deployment of facts (even if these manifest in a very personal shape).

Kureishi's apparent ideal of the essay, therefore, is both flexible and personal. As a form, the essay is notoriously difficult to pin down, with its critics seemingly haunted by 'a persistent uneasiness about where the essay "belongs" in the standard division of genres' (Joeres and Mittman, 1993: 12), but the characteristic feature of the essay that is most often invoked as its most notable aspect is precisely its openness: the essay, it is argued, strives not for certainty but to capture thought as a process, to lead the reader into a working-through of a problem or issue. In Adorno's much-cited reflections on the essay, it is precisely the action of thought, rather than its conclusion, that the form embodies: 'the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal' (Adorno, 1984: 159). Connected to this sense of the essay dramatising a moment of thought is the idea that the form relies crucially upon our perception of the 'presence' of the essayist within their work as a coherent and active guiding consciousness (Harvey, 1994). Yet this presence is itself a textual construction, an effect created by the essayist, inseparable from and equally as crafted as the handling of content. Virginia Woolf located the formation of the essayistic persona as the key challenge for the writer of essays: 'Never to be yourself and yet always — that is the problem' (Woolf, 2008: 18). This seems in part to link back to Kureishi's claim that 'personality is all' in literature, but personae do not necessarily evoke the captured transience of thought. Instead, their construction can be inspired by a wish to guide the reader more or less dogmatically to a particular position. The imagined figure whose cogitations we share might function as a tool of political manipulation as much as an invitation to open-ended speculation. Here perhaps lies a key difference between the meditative and the persuasive essay: while the persona presented in the former encourages participation in the work of ruminating upon an

object or issue, the latter's voice eschews some degree of this collaborative spirit and offers direction and conclusion as it parcels out its wisdom. Nonetheless, even within the persuasive form, a variety of relationships can be conjured between the persona and the reader, in which the reader is cajoled to a greater or lesser degree into accepting the expressed opinion.

Across his career Kureishi mobilises his essayistic persona in a number of different ways, and frequently moves between the meditative and persuasive poles in doing so. I wish, however, to focus predominantly on two particular moments in his oeuvre in which he can be seen to inhabit radically different personae and suggest that while in his essays of the mid to late 1980s his politics lead him towards an insistence on individuality and idiosyncrasy, his important essays that followed the 2005 bombings in London see him instead aligning himself with a mainstream liberalism.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, as his essays more explicitly pronounce upon the importance of individualist refusal of restrictive norms, he becomes more inclined to speak as part of a collective. One might understand this shift by recognising a distinction that could be drawn between demanding and enacting liberal values. The more stridently Kureishi's personae insist upon the need to protect and preserve liberal ideals, the less his essays embody them. I want to explore how his shift from meditative to persuasive personae manifests in part in Kureishi's deployment of personal pronouns in his essays. In the early writings he shies from prolonged usage of 'we', and when he does use it he does so very carefully; in the essays penned in the mid-2000s, however, the force of the first-person plural is absolutely central to the persona established within them and consequently to their rhetorical effect. Additionally, the strength of this enunciation risks diminishing the very openness that can make the essay form so attractive.

At stake here is not just a minor question of personal style. Instead, I want to suggest that the nature of the first person plural evident in Kureishi's essays on fundamentalism is

inseparable from one of the deepest problems faced within progressive thought in the early-twenty-first century: whether the tolerance fêted within liberalism should be extended to individuals or groups who are themselves intolerant, or whether liberalism has a duty to refuse to tolerate those who would seek to destroy it. The urge to defend liberalism against fundamentalists or other enemies always runs the risk of itself becoming illiberal. Indeed, the vociferousness of some of the defences of liberalism against, especially, the attacks made on its tenets by politicized Islam can work to ally liberals with those on other points of the political spectrum who hardly hold liberal ideals dear. The question can be raised as to whether it is possible to defend liberalism while still remaining liberal.<sup>5</sup> I would argue that a possible answer to this dilemma might be found in separating the *rhetoric of liberalism* that identifies and condemns illiberal abuses from a *liberal aesthetic* that finds ways to enact the individuality and pluralism that are liberalism's most precious treasures. Faced with the (sometimes immediately physical) threats of intolerance, the rhetoric of liberalism is no doubt at times essential in opposing that which cannot be accepted, but when it is articulated without the liberal aesthetic that reaffirms precisely what is worth saving about the liberal vision then the rhetoric risks working to erode that to which it professes devotion. The open form of the meditative essay seems precisely able to embody the liberal desire for tolerance and diversity in its apparent invitation to equal participation. The persuasive essay need not necessarily sacrifice this forbearance, but the open-minded mode is perhaps more difficult to sustain in this form of address. In Kureishi's essays that tilt toward a persuasive intent, the degree to which a liberal aesthetic is upheld alongside the rhetoric of liberalism seems intimately tied to the degree of care he takes in deploying the first person plural. When he writes in the plural form in his earlier essays it is usually as part of a meditative reflection on a particular well-defined situation. In the fundamentalism essays the plural address is unabashedly deployed in order to persuade, and

the cursory divisions enacted by his unsubtle use of 'we' risks undercutting the liberal ideology he seeks to defend.

*Collected Essays* is divided thematically, rather than chronologically, and no information is provided as to the original dates of publication of the essays contained within. However, even if it were not explicitly stated in the introduction, the reader might be able to identify 'The Rainbow Sign' as Kureishi's first published essay, given its continual return to the idea of a writing life coming into being.<sup>6</sup> In combining autobiographical detail with political commentary it serves as a foundation for understanding some of the motivations and inspirations that drive him; and it is thus unsurprising that it is quoted so often by critics examining his work. Interestingly, the essay itself offers many of the cues necessary to read its style. At the heart of the piece is the writer James Baldwin, offering Kureishi a model of 'anger and understanding [...] intelligence and love combined' (7). Baldwin offers a model of a writer who sharply understands the damage of racism, but who refuses to respond by curtailing any part of his own human feeling.<sup>7</sup> Even Kureishi's title openly pays homage to the American, taken as it is from the same spiritual as that of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin's combination of personal confession and far-reaching political decree in this seminal essay — his final paragraph moves from his teenage feelings in 'wine- and urine-soaked hallways' to prophesising a consciousness that might 'change the history of the world' (1963: 111–112) — is explicitly echoed in Kureishi's musings, with the younger writer melding the autobiographical and polemic throughout his essay. Carl Klaus has noted how Baldwin's persona often seems to eschew the common essayistic tension between the remembering and remembered self ('the I-present versus the I-past') in favour of a 'sustained concentration upon "I" as perceived by "They", as well as a reciprocal concentration of "They" as perceived by "I"' (Klaus, 2010: 91). This two-way observation and judgement is also a predominant feature of Kureishi's essay: 'I found it difficult



to get along with anyone. I was frightened and hostile. I suspected that my white friends were capable of racist insults. And many of them did taunt me, innocently' (7).

'The Rainbow Sign' can be read in terms of the distinction between the literary and the journalistic noted above. Much of the essay is autobiographical, exploring some of the tensions the young Hanif lived through, in both Britain and Pakistan, and his developing personality is very much to the fore in these sections. However, this is not the only mode of address found in the essay — in other parts of it the narrator as an idiosyncratic individual seems to recede. The first-person singular narrative voice that invoked a sense of distinct personality retreats in favour of a markedly impersonal narrative. The 'literary' virtue of imagining human complexity appears to be held in abeyance while the 'journalistic' imperative of foregrounding the facts is instead highlighted. The narrative voice is passive, and there seems little room here for unique subjectivity. The consecutive statements of fact that are given are fully intended to persuade and to establish important political truths in the face of a culture that has too easily dismissed, or explicitly contradicted, them in the past. Yet the autobiographical and impersonal voices are mutually reliant on each other, and each essential to the essay's success. The individual perceiving the world (frequently through the haze of youth) is matched by the 'objective' description of the world out there. From those preliminary investigations of the world moving around him, the reader is invited to deduce, comes the confident voice that can pronounce upon the contemporary malaise and prescribe solutions. This much Kureishi has learned from Baldwin. What is absent, however, in this dual form, is any recourse to the first-person plural. The reader is presented on the one hand with the monadic subject captured in the first-person singular, stumbling against confusion and inhospitality while trying to piece together fragments of the world outside him. On the other, she encounters a declarative pronoun-free voice that articulates from an Archimedean point of critique. Absent, however, is a voice which looks to

elucidate the connections between people and the shared experiences and meanings of social life by using the pronoun 'we'.<sup>8</sup> Reading Kureishi's essays with attention to when and how he does speak of 'we' allows for a greater understanding of his negotiation of the meditative and persuasive forms of the essay, the formal movement between literary and journalistic modes, and the divides and convergences between the private and the political. Such a critical endeavour also demands attention to how these elements necessarily have to be read together.

Many of Kureishi's early essays feature no first-person plural narration. In fact, after 'The Rainbow Sign', nor is the passive, objective voice often seen. Those Baldwin-like statements regarding the need for social change — 'It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was' (34) — become rarer. It seems that Kureishi's preferred address is very much the first-person singular, which might perhaps help to promote the idea of meditation dominating over persuasion as the purpose of the early essays. The first-person plural is at times actually explicitly set against this sense of individual rumination and response: it is suggested that the singular and plural forms are not two equally valid ways of expressing subjectivity, but rather that one voice speaks of liberty and the ability to contemplate the world freely and the other often indicates the stirrings of a dangerous groupthink. In 'Finishing the Job', where he writes of his attendance at the 1988 Conservative Conference in Brighton, the momentum of the essay is very much reliant on his construction of himself as an outsider, a cynical observer of the events and the 'I' he uses throughout is invaluable for this.<sup>9</sup> This is matched and contrasted with the use of 'we' in the speeches to which he listens at the conference. This 'we' is aggressively paranoid, and determined to insist on its unity against difference, whether that difference is coded in terms of race, sexuality, or a lack of 'civilised' values: 'Bring back snobbery!' a delegate excitedly responds to Peregrine Worsthorne's call for the reinstitution of domestic service in order for the better classes to teach the lower orders the

right way to live (76). The snobbish sense of the superiority of 'our kind of people' is precisely the type of collective identity that can be fostered by uniting behind the first-person plural. In 'The Rainbow Sign' this rallying behind the people 'of one's kind' is seen as one of the most insidious forms of New Right discourse:

What is the company of one's kind? Who exactly is of one's kind and what kind of people are they? Are they only those of the same "nation", of the same colour, race and background? I suspect that is what [Roger] Scruton intends. (26)

Kureishi explicitly attacks the illiberalism of speaking as 'we' at the end of 'Bradford' (published in *Granta* in 1986, soon after the appearance of 'The Rainbow Sign'), when he famously offers an alternative taxonomy of British culture to set against what he sees as the conservatism of the list T.S. Eliot first provided in 1948 (Eliot, 1962: 31). Kureishi's sense of the diversity of culture — including 'the films of Sylvester Stallone, therapy, hamburgers, visits to gay bars, the dole office and the taking of drugs' (56) — is intended specifically as a rejoinder to the 'we' of the New Right, insisting that 'among all the talk of unity on the New Right, there is no sense of the vast differences in attitude, life-style and belief, or in class, race and sexual preference, that *already* exist in British society' (56). To speak in the first-person plural, it seems, may be to participate in an invidious suppression of difference. His alternative to Eliot's list is not an attempt to construct a new, 'multicultural' or liberal 'we' but serves rather as a caution against the danger of trying to speak of collective culture at all in the late-twentieth-century climate of commercialised and postmodern fragmentation.<sup>10</sup>

Earlier in 'Bradford', though, Kureishi himself uses a first-person plural address and it is useful to examine how this operates. There is a short interruption in Kureishi's account of his time in Yorkshire in which he begins to discuss his childhood and adolescence in an autobiographical mode. Unlike in 'The Rainbow Sign', however, this is not done through the

first-person singular, but rather by mobilising the plural and speaking of 'kids of my colour and generation' (47). The suggestion of unity here is made problematic by the focalisation of the categorising and unifying voice in a perspective outside of the supposed collective that it identifies. It is not Kureishi's generation who first identify themselves as being a distinct group; the judgement is made from the outside looking in: 'We were frequently referred to as "second-generation immigrants" just so there was no mistake about our not really belonging in Britain. We were "Britain's children without a home". The phrase "caught between two cultures" was a favourite' (48). These youths are labelled as alien and incompatible with British life; any unity within the group is predicated on this supposed difference from wider society. The 'we' who articulate a response perhaps do so only reactively, in terms established by a rigidly Manichean imposition of difference (Fanon, 1990: 31).<sup>11</sup> However, by the end of the short interjection, Kureishi turns to a use of 'we' which is far less cynical and speaks of an actual rather than imputed sense of shared experience: 'for me and the others of my generation born here, Britain was always where we belonged, even when we were told — often in terms of racial abuse — that this was not so' (48). Admittedly, the 'we' here is tentative but it is nonetheless implied: 'me and the others' suggests the possibility of metonymic connection — if it was like this for him, then surely it was also the same for people in similar situations — but it stops short of completing subsuming others' experience into his own. Nevertheless, there is a sense that while the initial unity may have been imposed as part of moment of domination, the act of resistance to this marginalisation and exclusion may have engendered a truer sense of group identity. This unity is no less real or meaningful from being formed in this way.

A similar use of 'we' is at work when Kureishi writes in 'Eight Arms to Hold You' of the boys at his Bromley school, here unified by class rather than race, but similarly understood as a unified group firstly from without in order to disparage them, and later finding in this exclusion

itself the seeds of a meaningful group identity: 'We felt and sometimes recognised [...] that our teachers had no respect for us as people capable of learning, of finding the world compelling and wanting to know it' (82).<sup>12</sup> The reader need not imagine the uses of 'we' in 'Bradford' and 'Eight Arms to Hold You' as postulating homogeneity of thought among the diverse individuals who make up the group, but rather only as an acknowledgment of the fact that they each come from the same starting place, and are equally conditioned by the same social constraints and dynamics. Such a use of the first-person plural seems to fall between the distinct uses described by Herbert Spiegelberg as the '*we of copresence*' and the '*absentee we*'. The former 'includes only people with whom the speaker stands in [...] direct face-to-face relationship' and who are 'in direct audiovisual contact with the speaker, to whom they can respond', while the latter 'occurs chiefly where the speaker talks to outsiders as a representative of contemporaries who are not only absent whom he, at least usually, does not know in person' (1973: 131–132). Kureishi's schoolmates have no say in the generalisation he makes about their attitudes towards education during the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, but his use of past tense complicates simply seeing this as a manifestation of the absentee 'we' that implies the participation of others to one's cause. Rather, the recruitment of consociates as associates (these are Spiegelberg's terms to distinguish the merely-present from the also-participating) is predicated precisely on the fact of their shared material experience in the past: they were there together, and together they articulated their responses. The absentees within Kureishi's 'we' are justified as the traces of a prior and authenticating copresence. He is always careful to define exactly who falls within this 'we' (and it can vary across the essays, including for example lower-middle-class schoolboys, second-generation immigrants, left-wing Londoners and so on), and is cautious in justifying to what extent his personal experience allows him to speak for this group.

In a discussion of the use of first-person plural narration in fictional narratives, Amit Marcus has explored the idea that such narration may be uncommon because of the unwelcome degree to which it suggests it is possible to know the mind of another, and for diverse individuals to think alike. Marcus points out that this is only a problem if you are tied to the idea of representing individual consciousness at all: there are plenty of ways of discussing collectives that do not require us to do this (2008: 48–52). Some of the rhetorical moves made by Kureishi by using first-person plural narrative in 'Bradford' and *Eight Arms to Hold You* involve aspects of such moving away from the idea of unique subjectivity and towards ideas of structural change, the notion that people are necessarily shaped in particular ways by the pressures of the historical situation around them. This actually saves Kureishi's 'we' in these essays from necessarily replacing his sense of the primacy of the individual personality in thinking about questions of agency and identity: here 'we' is perhaps used precisely to indicate when one is borne upon a cultural tide outside of one's control, while 'I' indicates those moments when individual agency is possible. The 'pronominal tact' evinced here never uses 'we' to evoke the universal, even when it allows for the plural (Lopate, 1995: xl).

Like most writers, Kureishi has never published a novel entirely written in the first-person plural,<sup>13</sup> but *Intimacy* is notable for those many occasions when the narrator Jay tries to generalise his experience and offer observations on behalf of an 'absentee we' that seems to include his whole generation: 'We weren't much restrained by morality or religion. Music, dancing and conscienceless fucking were our totems. We boasted that we were the freest there'd ever been' (Kureishi, 1999: 69). Mark Stein perceptively interrogates the content of this 'we' that frequently occurs throughout the novel, noting how it teases us with questions like 'Who is "we"? Who are "we"? How wide is the scope of this "we"? (2004: 134). He concludes that this 'vagueness' is perhaps the most important element of the pronoun's use, and links this

to the 'inside-outside dyad' that he see as crucial to the structure of the novel (2004: 134).

However, in a novel that is so often concerned with tracing Jay's vanity and evasions, it is worth exploring how this need to stretch his experience to include others might function. The people who make up Jay's 'we' are almost never named and certainly lack the concrete presence of Kureishi's Bromley schoolmates. His appeal to a plural self might be read then as an attempt to fudge his individual responsibility for much of his behaviour and instead to lay blame on the cultural milieu in which he was raised. To fall back on 'we' like this, Kureishi's novel suggests, can be a way of exonerating a culpable 'I'.<sup>14</sup> It is not dissimilar to the dissembling strategy of what Spiegelberg calls the 'plural of modesty': 'there is something cowardly, if not funny, in surrounding oneself with imaginary others, as if it were not much more pretentious to speak in the name of others as of one's seemingly self-effacing little I' (1973: 131). Kureishi seems well aware of what is at stake when the cautious boundaries of the first-person singular are broken.

In *Collected Essays*, then, the reader frequently encounters an essayist unwilling to confine heterogeneous individuals to closed collectives, and Kureishi looks for ways in which questions about identity can be staged without looking for answers that insist on the stifling of diversity. He most often finds this imagining of multiplicity in literature. It is this openness to difference that distinguishes it from journalism. He relates that he only resolved the existential crisis brought about by the constant demand from without to justify how he belonged in Britain by coming to recognise himself foremost as a writer. In 'Something Given' he invokes the difference between Tolstoy and Chekhov in order to argue that the former thought life's problems could be solved, while the latter realised the task of literature was simply to lay them out: 'scepticism was preferable to a didacticism or advocacy which seemed to settle everything but which, in reality, closed everything off' (280). The power of literature (and by extension, writers themselves) to protect the complexity of the individual against the tyranny of the group is

crucial to Kureishi's conception of his vocation and can be seen to inform his belief in the need for 'personality' to infuse the literary work. This certainly seems to be at work when he asserts that 'it is the artist who is necessary' and that freedom of interpretation is often to be preferred over the sterile judgements of the critic: 'Criticism erases the pleasure of reading, replacing it by understanding, which is a different sort of thing' (280). He is writing at this point about literary criticism, as he is worried that it reduces the number of ways a reader might fruitfully approach a text, but it seems fair to extrapolate his expressed ideal to cover other forms of critique. The quest to label definitively may promote one kind of knowledge, but for Kureishi it must always do so through some kind of violence against necessary individual autonomy.

It is startling, therefore, to note that this stance in favour of liberty is paradoxically jettisoned at precisely the moment when these forms of freedom are placed most under threat. In the series of essays Kureishi wrote on the topic of Islamic fundamentalism, analysis and critique are precisely the dominant modes — and matching this is a new dominant voice, a confident and consistent embrace of the first-person plural. 'The Arduous Conversation Will Continue', written for the *Guardian* in response to the London bombings of July 2005, begins with an implied assertion of the validity of the first-person plural which would be striking even if Kureishi had not previously shown such an aversion to this mode of address: 'We no longer know what it is to be religious, and haven't for a while' (127). The statement is bold not only in its open assumption of speaking for a majority, but also in its embrace of the reader within its viewpoint. Discourse analysts have long distinguished between writers' use of the 'exclusive we', which aligns the author with some (known or unknown) others, and the 'inclusive we' which takes in the reader also (Wales, 1996: 7). The historically and socially determinate groups evoked in the earlier essays are moments when Kureishi employs the exclusive 'we'; here it is



assuredly the inclusive form. The reader is invited, and perhaps required, to accept an interpellation that aligns her with the stated opinion.

Jean François Lyotard identifies such uses of we as 'in effect the linchpin of the discourse of authorisation' (1988: 98). He finds it within those moments when the law articulates itself as both sovereign and compulsory, such as in the constitutional moment where democracy is announced as the surrender of individual freedom to the social contract: "*we*", *the French people, declare that...*' (1988: 98). The force of such a 'we' is to be found in the fact that it not only operates on a prescriptive, but also a normative level: the addressees recognise themselves as the originators of the norm and therefore accept the entailed prescription as their manifest will. Lyotard glosses how the above statement contains both the meaning '*we*', *the French people, decree as a norm that, etc.*' and "*we*", *the French people, ought to carry out act α*' and notes that the 'we' in each of these statements does not occupy the same status: 'in the normative, the 'we' is the addressor of the norm; in the prescriptive, it is the addressee of the obligation' (1988: 98). The purpose of the single 'we' in the constitutional statement then, is precisely to mask this displacement and to seamlessly tie the assertion of a norm to the compulsion to fulfil certain directives.

Kureishi's 'we' in the fundamentalism essays is of this nature. He does not only ask his reader to sympathise and agree with him but also to recognise themselves in his words and accept this logic as their own. It is important then to clarify to what the reader is asked to acquiesce, what worldview she is asked to adopt and what behaviour is then dictated. The description in 'The Word and the Bomb' of our bafflement before the fundamentalist is important: 'Forgetting how zealous we had once been about our own description of equality — socialism — we could only be shocked by their commitment and solidarity, and by their hatred of injustice, as well as their determination to bring about social change' (100).<sup>15</sup> The ideological

position to which the reader is interpellated is not itself without a suggested history: she is asked not simply to assume a synchronic position of authority from which to judge the deviations of fundamentalism, but actually placed within a diachronic account of a post-Marxist left liberalism. This 'we' is stylistically and politically a long way from Kureishi's usual shying away from the imposition of collective identity. His nailing of his colours to the mast is no doubt tied to his belief that liberalism has reached a point where it has to 'take a stand' (Malik 2009: 202), even if his recognition that 'liberalisms and fundamentalisms generate each other' suggests that he remains a long way from embracing David Cameron's panacea of 'muscular liberalism' (Chambers 2011: 238; Wintour 2011: 1). Liberalism is concretely imagined as an embattled ideology, and his reader as a participant in this strife. The liberal subject is called upon to defend their beliefs against the illiberal diktats of fundamentalism.

Lyotard goes on to explore an instability in the dual address of the 'we' declaration. While the normative element is complete unto itself, insisting on the fact of a shared conviction, the prescriptive element always requires a further justification for its sense to be complete: the prescription must always be accompanied by a supplementary moment in which the addressee meets, disappoints or forswears its obligation, or else it becomes superfluous (1988: 99). Interestingly, Kureishi's call for the reader to recognise the literary as the seedbed of liberalism and the necessary (and obligatory) opposite to fundamentalism does not at first seem to require such further evaluative work in assessing the degree to which she has met that obligation: merely by reading, by participating within the discursive sphere within the obligation is formulated, she asserts her support. Nonetheless, the evaluative work is still carried out: 'The Arduous Conversation Will Continue' exhorts us for several paragraphs to continue with the ethical work of remaining receptive to literary meaning — which the reader is able to do merely by accepting the interpellation offered to us by the essay's first word — before finally suggesting

that this work must also be carried out by 'not only us' (129). The actual addressees of the prescription become clear, as does their distance from the originators of the norm. The 'we' here is precisely designed to identify a deviant group and to castigate; rhetorically, the strategy is no different from that enacted by the New Right which is deplored by Kureishi in 'Bradford', as discussed above (this observation is certainly not intended to suggest that the political meanings of these two rhetorical constructions are the same, but rather to draw attention to the fact that they create their diverse meanings through very similar ideological manoeuvres). This prescription serves also to divorce the abnormal group who find meaning in religion from the concrete liberalism identified in the initiatory 'we', in contrast to Kureishi's usual view that fundamentalists, too, are the children of twentieth-century liberalism — which is where much of the power of a story like 'My Son the Fanatic' comes from (Kureishi, 1998: 119–131). Notably, Kureishi's opening statement does not seem to make a distinction between the majority of religious believers and the minority of violent fundamentalists. In the statement 'we no longer know what it is to be religious', a clear division is set up between the secular in-group and its others.

Of course, many years passed between Kureishi's early essays and the bold statements of an essay like 'The Arduous Conversation Must Continue'. We could see the change in the mode of address as a result of his growing maturity as a writer — he recently told an interviewer that the 'great' thing about being a writer is that 'every 10 years you become someone else' (McCrum 2014) — but the shift equally should be seen in relation to the shifting terrains both of history and of literary discourse about difference. As well as the transnational traumas enacted by the London bombings and the attack on the World Trade Center that preceded them, Kureishi was clearly greatly influenced by the fatwa pronounced against his friend Salman Rushdie, as seen in *The Black Album* (1995). Equally, many of Kureishi's

defences of literature as a space of imagination echo the arguments put forward in some of the essays collected in Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1991).<sup>16</sup> The 'we' at the centre of the essay, however, might seem indebted in part to Ian McEwan's celebrated response to the 9/11 attacks, where he wrote of how 'after the shock we move inevitably to the grief, and the sense that we are doing it more or less together is one tiny scrap of consolation' (McEwan 2001). Yet, while for McEwan imagination is to be centrally understood as empathy, from which he finds hope, for Kureishi literature instead offers foremost a forum for critique, a place where the moral values 'of what we call "civilisation"' can be insisted upon, including crucially the prohibition against violence' (129). We might then trace the seed of this provocative use of the first-person plural to another significant essay in defence of 'civilisation' against its enemies: V. S. Naipaul's 'Our Universal Civilisation'.<sup>17</sup> In this essay, Naipaul castigates the Islamic world for its unwillingness to participate in civilisation, where progress and liberty are possible. At one key moment he addresses how this civilisation is necessary for literary production, as the genesis of literature is inextricably tied to its intellectual enablement: 'it is easy to think of writing only in its personal, romantic aspect. Writing is a private act; but the published book, when it starts to live, speaks of the co-operation of a particular type of society' (Naipaul 2002: 506). Naipaul's point here seems to be that the bounty of the imagination can only be enjoyed once a much wider set of social and ideological imperatives are accepted. This is what is at stake in his first-person plural possession of 'civilisation' in his essay's title. Kureishi's call for a policing of those who refuse imaginative dissent seems closer to this than to the empathic reaching out sought by McEwan. Responding to Lyotard's work, Jacques Derrida once asked, 'Who can dare a 'we' without trembling?' (Derrida 2000: 28). Kureishi follows Naipaul in expressing no such trepidation when imagining a steadfast union of civilised Western subjects standing against a threatening religious horde that looms outside of its enlightened domain.<sup>18</sup>

Claire De Obaldia suggests that the strength of the essay as a form lies in part in its ability (which it perhaps shares with the novel) to ‘thematize’ oppositions (1995: 62): it can allow for holding of diverse perspectives within a single span and shies from imposing any certainty beyond that created in the bond between the essayistic persona and the reader. To instead invoke a broader shared worldview (and to insist on disciplining those who fall without it) can then be read as something of an abandonment of the greatest potential of the form.<sup>19</sup> It is certainly quite separate from the meditative qualities Kureishi identifies as key to the form. In his early essays, Kureishi seems to take full advantage of a mode of writing that ‘remains a focus of individual resistance to “systems” of various kinds, political, intellectual, and cultural’, in order to carve out an essential space for himself in a society and tradition that offered no clear models for how to belong (Good, 1988: 185). However, his later essays on Islam sacrifice some of this freedom to polemicism and perhaps thereby forswear a full embrace of the possibilities offered by the form.

At the end of ‘Loose Tongues’, Kureishi provocatively states ‘that the virtue and risk of real multiculturalism is that we could find that our values are, ultimately, irreconcilable with those of others’ (347). The suggestion here is less of irresolvable clashes between discrete civilisations as much as recognition that any individual might in fact be unable to reconcile beliefs with any other. He associates this idea with ‘noise’ and ‘confusion’, but also with the redemptive potential of the literary (347). It is also exactly what the inclusive ‘we’ of his fundamentalism essays speaks against. Rehana Ahmed has argued against the common perception of Kureishi ‘as deconstructing essentialised notions of culture that operate through polarities of “us” and “them”’, and instead insists that ‘a polarisation between a cross-cultural liberal protagonist and a monocultural, illiberal “other” informs much of his work’ (2009: 32). It is interesting to note in *Collected Essays* the seeming paradox that it is precisely when he comes

to attack this particular perceived threat of monocultural fundamentalism that Kureishi resorts to speaking in the plural, and on insisting on his own version of a unified collective. His early essays carefully outline the importance of perceiving the world as an individual and refusing the consolations of univocality across a group, but the inclusive address of the essays on fundamentalism relies on precisely this. He has written of the value to a budding writer of 'borrowing' another's voice (330), but attributing one's own voice to others is perhaps a completely opposite process. When this is done by a writer who has so acutely presented the moral complexity and danger of ventriloquism in a story called 'With Your Tongue Down My Throat' (Kureishi, 1998: 61–106), it seems a particular loss. Spiegelberg counsels against the use of 'we' unless one is sure 'that your we-partners want you speak for them' and insists that this is not only 'a matter of respect for their dignity', but also 'a matter of intellectual honesty and moral courage' (1974: 154). Kureishi's use of the first-person plural in his essays reveals a writer who is frequently attentive to this exhortation, but also one who, at particularly crucial moments, can seem to abandon it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Claire De Obaldia (1995: 16-28) has explored in detail the tendency for critics to see the essay form as paratextual, rather than intrinsically literary. At best, she suggests, the essay is seen as having the 'potential' to become literary writing. By instead accepting the essay as literature from the start, the relations between its stylistic and argumentative functions can be productively examined. In this discussion, I will try to invert the usual hierarchy by turning to Kureishi's writings in other forms only in order to further illuminate the essays.

<sup>2</sup> 'Humouring the State' was originally given as the PEN/Pinter Prize Lecture in 2010. All subsequent quotations from the essays will be from this edition of *Collected Essays*, and will be cited parenthetically in the text, though full details of the original publication of all essays cited are given in the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> This essay was originally published as the introduction to Kureishi's collection of selected essays *Dreaming and Scheming* (2002).

<sup>4</sup> While the latter moment can be pinpointed more precisely historically, the first is clearly important to the development of Kureishi as a writer, as the success of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) launched him to global attention, including a nomination for an Academy Award in 1987.

<sup>5</sup> In his essays on multiculturalism and tolerance (1997, 2008), Slavoj Žižek returns to Marx's analysis of how the Party of Order offered up a sham republicanism in 1848, barely deigning to conceal their

royalist beliefs, yet inadvertently laid the foundation for the Republic. Žižek suggests that their delusion about their true royalist nature was in part the motor that enable them to carry out their republican function so effectively. The danger for those who would argue against tolerating intolerance is that their impassioned pleas on behalf of liberalism may contribute to its evisceration.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Rainbow Sign' was published alongside the screenplay of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986). In the introduction to *Collected Essays*, Kureishi describes the essay as 'an opportunity for me to think about some of the issues raised in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and in the plays I'd written before that' (vii).

<sup>7</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert has explored how Baldwin can be seen as an important influence on Kureishi's novels and films — both writers' work display 'a characteristic mingling of issues of ethnicity, politics and "deviant" sexuality' (2001: 7) — but he does not trace the significance of this influence into Kureishi's non-fiction.

<sup>8</sup> One way to frame this seeming distrust of a collective voice is by understanding 'The Rainbow Sign' in terms of the cultural debates taking place at that time regarding the relative virtues of promoting univocality within 'black' communities as opposed to accepting and encouraging a diversity of perspectives. The classic delineation of this moment is, of course, Stuart Hall's 'New Ethnicities' (1988). Kureishi's concentration on individual biography over the political efficacy of speaking as a group has links to the exploration of 'embodied' voice sometimes found in feminist writing on the essay form: 'a voice that draws its authority not from external sources but from my own life, from my own experience as a human being with experiential knowledge, emotions, sexual desire, and bodily aches and pains' (Hewitt 2004: 738).

<sup>9</sup> 'Finishing the Job' was written for *New Statesman and Society* in 1988 and therefore aligns Kureishi with a key forum where ideas regarding the social democratic challenge to Thatcherism were being played out, as well as a site where soon-to-be seminal conceptions of racial and ethnic difference were crossing from an academic to a popular audience: other contributors in this period included Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha.

<sup>10</sup> Kureishi consistently seems sceptical of notions of community: while there is a slight note in 'The Rainbow Sign' of nostalgic longing when he notes how Pakistan seems to have a sense of 'supportive common life', he qualifies this by insisting that it is 'at the expense of movement and change' (17). Most often his attitude across his essays tallies with his aside in the introduction to *Collected Essays* that 'luckily, there's no community spirit' in the district of Hammersmith where he lives (viii).

<sup>11</sup> There are echoes here again of the Baldwinian persona who understands himself in relation to how others read him: as Kureishi puts it in his praise of Baldwin: 'he had more to say than [other contemporary essayists], particularly about what it is to live in a society where one's identity is always in doubt, if not under attack' (vii-viii).

<sup>12</sup> 'Eight Arms to Hold You' was first published alongside the screenplay for *London Kills Me* (1991).

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, such novels are very rare, though Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Joshua Ferris's *Then 'we' Came to the End* (2007) are celebrated recent examples.

<sup>14</sup> This sense of exonerated culpability becomes especially interesting when read in relation to the controversy surrounding the novel, the plot of which was closely tied to the breakdown of the author's own relationship. It has been noted that 'beneath the apparent criticism, there does lurk a strong element of subtly disguised special pleading by Kureishi on Jay's behalf' (Rennison 2005: 82).

<sup>15</sup> 'The Word and the Bomb' served as the title essay for a collection of Kureishi's writings on Islam published in 2005.

---

<sup>16</sup> In Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate's *The New Atheist Novel* (2010), they demonstrate how this linking of literature and liberalism is characteristic of much recent fiction that works to reject religious belief (while also noting that this connection tends not to be made by the non-literary New Atheists like Richard Dawkins). I explore the intertextual links between Rushdie's essays and *The Black Album* in chapter two of my *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature* (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Naipaul's essay was first given as a talk in Manhattan during the US invasion of Iraq in 1990 and appeared as an opinion piece in the *New York Times*. The quotations here, though, are taken from the longer version of the talk published in his *The Writer and the World* (2002). Such invocation of a shared civilisation is actually rarely to be found expressed so explicitly in Naipaul's non-fiction, where he generally 'perceives community or collective endeavour of any kind as a noose, strangling all hope of solitude and individuality' (Nixon 1992: 172).

<sup>18</sup> Kureishi's fascination with the older writer is particularly apparent in his 2014 novel *The Last Word*, in which the elderly writer Mamoon Azam is a fictionalised — but clearly recognisable — version of Naipaul.

<sup>19</sup> Kureishi's 'we' is unusual in the modern essay. While we find it more plentifully in the Victorian form, few later writers use it so confidently: of the 72 essays John Gross chooses to represent the twentieth century in his Oxford anthology (1991), fewer than one in five contain the first-person plural and in fewer still is it central to the construction of persona. The non-specific 'we' that speaks for a culture, nation or civilisation as a whole seems to be no more common in the political essay than in those that deal with more personal matters: it seems not to make any appearance at all, for example, in the more than 1300 pages of the Everyman edition of George Orwell's *Essays* (2002).



## References

- Adorno TW (1984). The essay as form [1958]. Trans by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will. *New German Critique* 32: 151–171.
- Ahmed R (2009). Occluding race in selected short fiction by Hanif Kureishi. *Wasafiri* 24(2): 27–34.
- Baldwin J (1963). *The Fire Next Time* [1962]. London: Michael Joseph.
- Bradley A and Tate A (2010). *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*. London: Continuum.
- Buchanan B (2007). *Hanif Kureishi*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chambers C (2011). Hanif Kureishi. In: *British Muslim Fictions: 'Interviews with Contemporary Writers*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 226–242.
- De Obaldia C (1995). *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Derrida J (2000). Lyotard and us. *Parallax*, 6(4): 28–48.
- Eliot TS (1962). *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* [1948]. London: Faber and Faber.
- Eugenides J (1993). *The Virgin Suicides*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Fanon F (1990). *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961]. Trans by Constance Farrington. London: Penguin.
- Ferris J (2007). *Then We Came to the End*. London: Viking.
- Good G (1988). *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. London: Routledge.
- Gross J (1991) (ed.) *The Oxford Book of Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gunning D (2010) *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

- Hall S (1988). New ethnicities. In: Mercer K (ed.) *Black Film, British Cinema*. London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, pp. 27–31.
- Harvey G (1994). Presence in the essay. *College English* 56: 642–654.
- Hewett H (2004). In search of an 'I': embodied voice and the personal essay. *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 33(6): 719–741.
- Joeres R-EB and Mittman E (1993). An introductory essay. In: Joeres R-EB and Mittman E (eds) *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Klaus CH (2010) *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Kureishi H (1986) *My Beautiful Laundrette and the Rainbow Sign*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (1986) Bradford. *Granta* 20: 149–170.
- Kureishi H (1988). Finishing the job. *New Statesman and Society* 1(21): 19–24.
- Kureshi H (1991) *London Kills Me*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (1995). *The Black Album*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (1998). *Love in a Blue Time* [1997]. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (1999). *Intimacy* [1998]. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (2002). *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (2005a). The arduous conversation will continue. *Guardian* 18 July. Online.
- Kureishi H (2005b) *The Word and the Bomb*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (2010). *Humouring the State: the PEN/Pinter prize lecture 2010*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kureishi H (2011). *Collected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber.

- Kureishi H (2014) *The Last Word*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Lopate P (1995). Introduction. In: Lopate P (ed.) *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. New York: Anchor, pp. xxiii–liv.
- Lyotard, J-F (1988). *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* [1983]. Trans by Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Malik K (2009). *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and its Legacy*. London: Atlantic.
- Marcus A (2008). A contextual view of narrative fiction in the first person plural. *Narrative* 16(1): 46–64.
- McCrum R (2014). Hanif Kureishi interview: ‘Every 10 years you become someone else’. *Guardian*. 19 January. Online.
- McEwan I (2001). Only love and then oblivion. *Guardian*. 15 September. Online.
- Moore-Gilbert B (2001). *Hanif Kureishi*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Naipaul VS (1990). Our universal civilisation. *New York Times* 5 November. Online.
- Naipaul VS (2003). Our universal civilisation. In *The Writer and the World: Essays* [2002]. Basingstoke: Picador, pp. 503–517.
- Nixon R (1992). *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Orwell G (2002). *Essays*. New York: Knopf.
- Ranasinha R (2002). *Hanif Kureishi*. Tavistock: Northcote.
- Rennison N (2005). *Contemporary British Novelists*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rushdie S (1991). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991*. London: Granta in association with Viking.

- Spiegelberg H (1973). On the right to say 'we': a linguistic and phenomenological analysis. In: Psathas G (ed.), *Phenomenological Sociology: Issues and Applications*. New York: John Wiley, pp. 129–156.
- Stein M (2004), *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*. Colombus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Wales K (1996). *Personal Pronouns in Present-Day English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wintour P (2011). Cameron tells Muslim Britain: stop tolerating extremists: PM says those who don't hold 'British' values will be shunned by government. *The Guardian*, 5 February, 1.
- Woolf V (2008) 'The modern essay' [1922]. In: Bradshaw D (ed.) *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 13–22.
- Žižek S (1997). Multiculturalism, or, the cultural logic of multinational capitalism. *New Left Review* 1/225: 28–51.
- Žižek S (2008). Tolerance as an ideological category. *Critical Inquiry* 34(4): 660–682.